

LEGER: Fantino a loose cannon on deck

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For sheer opportunism and political cynicism, it's hard to beat the football match in which Canadian Forces veterans find themselves these days. But then, consider the minister in charge.

Veterans have legitimate complaints about their deteriorating treatment by Ottawa. And Canadians are mostly sympathetic; they want aging warriors to be treated fairly. What's going on now doesn't look fair.

Strangely, this is the same Conservative government that had cast itself as pro-military and respectful of those who served. Something has changed.

And it goes beyond spending restraint and the pinch on the military budget. The Afghanistan mission is all but over, so obviously the government is extracting a peace dividend through cancelled or delayed equipment purchases and cuts to training and personnel support.

But that doesn't explain what is happening in the increasingly chaotic realm of veterans' affairs, which is not a portfolio easily messed up. That is, unless it's being run by Julian Fantino, who must be a source of bewildering disappointment for Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Rather than acting as a champion for veterans' rights, Fantino is proving himself to be out of touch with his department's constituency and tone-deaf to Canadians. It wasn't only that sorry televised confrontation in which he treated veterans like panhandlers and union puppets.

Federal Veterans Affairs offices are closing and staff are being laid off. Vets are being sent to Service Canada's all-purpose bureaus around the country.

Service Canada staff will now have to master the labyrinthine regulations of yet another federal program, along with the Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, employment insurance and the rest. Veterans will be just so many numbers.

The government is also using clawbacks and program loopholes to trim veterans' benefits.

But the minister thinks it's all hunky-dory because being a minnow in a cabinet of sharks, that's what he's told to think.

Which is probably just as well. Fantino wasn't appointed for his analytical skills. He's there as a "law and order" former cop from Vaughan, Ont., a vote-rich area for the Conservatives.

Never mind Fantino's controversies, which included wiretapping a political critic of the police, a specious roundup of gay men in London, Ont., and his wrongful identification of several men as child pornography suspects.

In that case, none of the men was charged and one committed suicide over the destruction of his reputation.

No matter. Harper wanted law and order and put Fantino into the cabinet. He held fittingly junior posts until getting slotted last summer into Veterans Affairs, which is a real department with real public responsibilities.

Maybe Fantino got the post because of his claim that as a former policeman, he's a veteran too. It's bogus, but that's his story.

Now Fantino has written to The Chronicle Herald to complain about New Democrat MP Peter Stoffer nitpicking DVA's decision to farm out medical records handling to a private firm.

Stoffer's complaint was pretty thin in the context of what's happening to veterans. But the reaction was vintage Fantino: all victimization and purple outrage.

"The NDP stooped to new lows in the search for partisan headlines at Canadian veterans' expense," the minister complained. "That's how the Mulcair-led NDP operates: mislead, misinform and spread fear among the veteran population."

Any time you hear a Conservative cabinet minister talking about new lows in partisanship or misleading, misinforming and spreading fear for political advantage, rest assured he knows whereof he speaks.

The Conservatives would do well to be careful with this file. Veterans signed on to serve the country and now they feel they are getting shafted. Many Canadians agree.

The Conservatives hit a juicy Liberal target by leaking news of retired Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie's \$72,000 relocation payment. But thousands of other veterans collected from the same program. Are they all now guilty of excessive entitlement?

An astute minister with real concern for veterans and his portfolio would see the danger and warn of it. In Fantino, veterans and Canadians get none of that.